

COUNSELING

Counseling is an effort to work out mutual solutions to problems. Supervisors should sit down and counsel their employees in a manner which respects their positions and feelings and which works toward the mutual benefit of both parties and the Agency as a whole. Such counseling sessions might discuss a work production schedule or problem, what appears to be a mistake made by the employee, a complaint or grievance by the employee, or a personal matter about which the employee seeks guidance or advice. Counseling should be used also for performance appraisals. Such sessions can promote increased understanding between the supervisor and employee, point out areas of good performance for praise and recognition, ascertain reasons for weaknesses, find methods for improving and bringing about better future performance, and bring about a totally improved climate in which the employee feels more confident and communicative in future interpersonal relations.

Employee-supervisor talks are just one aspect of a counseling program, however. Such talks do not eliminate the need for career consultations between employees and Career Service representatives or counselors. Employees are probably more anxious about the status of their careers and their chances for personal development than they are about their current jobs. Although we make this distinction between career counseling and talks between supervisors and employees, the effectiveness of each is interrelated. There is little point in expanding a program of career counseling without attending simultaneously to an improvement of the level of supervisory assistance and coaching.

The principal thrust of a career counseling program should be positive. Career counseling should mainly concentrate on employees with potential for improvement and relate to specific means of realizing their personal development--assignments, training, personal improvements, career broadening, etc. It should also provide a forum for employees to talk about their work and its challenges, including any job or institutional rigidities that they think limit their capacity to be innovative and contributive.

Career counseling may be selective and initiated only when an employee seeks it or it may be mandatory on a regularly scheduled basis, according to Career Service needs. Whatever program is used, it should not be limited to employees considered to be substandard or problem cases. This approach overlooks the principal value of career counseling, namely, to provide career assistance to employees whose capabilities for professional growth should be further channeled and developed.

Our initial Personnel Practices Survey findings indicate that the availability of counseling services--and the focal point for those services--varies considerably from component to component and Career Service to Career Service. One office provides no counseling except that done by supervisors; one uses the Personnel Officer as counselor; another has established a Career Development Office, manned by operational people, to assist managers with their career development responsibilities, such as establishing career patterns; and two have Career Management Staffs which determine individual career development plans.

The Survey has revealed only one office which initiates counseling sessions with employees on a regularly established basis. Most managers advocate an "open-door policy" even though many employees do not go to their Career Service counselors without an invitation. Much career information that ordinarily would be provided in a Career Service counseling program either is not given to employees or is relayed to them by their supervisors, after having been passed down through command channels. In such instances, career counseling is often fragmentary and confined to a prospective change, a problem, or a notable aspect of good or bad performance.

The Personnel Approaches Study Group recognized the vacuum which exists in the area of counseling. Their report recommended the establishment of Directorate-wide career counseling programs and the Agency Management Committee approved the recommendation. This new requirement should get the Career Management Officer and/or another designated representative of the Career Service Head actively involved in the counseling process.